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# Left Dad for a Cowboy

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# LEFT DAD FOR A COWBOY

by

Alexandra Gayowsky

A Creative Writing Project  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through the Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts at the  
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2012

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## ABSTRACT

*Left Dad for a Cowboy* is an autobiographical collection of prose poems and an accompanying critical essay that explore the relationships among memory, language, and imagination, specifically the heightened sensory experience of childhood memory and how it shapes one's understanding of the world. The collection takes place in three different settings: Windsor, Ontario where the writer is raised by her father; Havre, Montana where she spends the majority of her summers with her mother; and St. Joseph Island, Ontario where she spends a small portion of her summers with her mother's parents. As the poem titles suggest, each piece within the collection is inspired by an object that evokes a specific memory. This work attempts to demonstrate the process of remembering and how we mediate this process through language.

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“What matters in life is not what happens to you but what you remember  
and how you remember it.”

— Gabriel García Márquez

“We notice, too, that children, who, as we know, are in the habit of still treating words as things,  
tend to expect words that are the same or similar to have the same meaning behind them—  
which is a source of many mistakes that are laughed at by grown-up people.”

— Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relations to the Unconscious*



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I lose keys.

I lose marbles and pencils.

Passports and sandpaper.

I lose bobby pins.

I lose at snakes and ladders.

Rocks, papers, and scissors.

I lose directions.

I lose instructions.

I lose glasses in bed.

Too many spoons.

I lose letters.

I lose pictures of letters.

I lose at least two bicycles.

I lose baskets and dogs inside baskets.

Jacks and puppets.

I lose parts of songs.

I lose four suitcases.

I lose time.

Quarters and eighths and sixteenths.

I lose numbers.

I lose mothers.

Socks and mittens lose me.

I lose theoretical ponies.

I lose doorknobs.

I lose buttons off jackets.

Buttons down holes in pockets.

I lose corners of pages.

I lose hold.

Of shoelaces and pen caps.

Napkins and latches and hands.

I lose punch lines.

I lose halves of bologna sandwiches.

Elastics and eight single earrings.

I lose jam between toes.

I lose sleep.

I lose count.

## A PHOTOGRAPH

Her mom eighteen years old or nineteen with feathered black hair doesn't have the perm yet no the perm comes later but has round cheeks always the round cheeks getting off work from Dominion grocery store her dad but not her dad then waiting in the parking lot with his Camaro the Camaro had to have been the Camaro his first car what colour was it again fluorescent green not black definitely not black. Crackle. A copy of *JT* for her birthday. Yes *JT* whatever album "Your Smiling Face" is on listening to it together in his living room her mom still in her uniform a zip-up dress shirt with a red collar to match the pants her dad and his thick-rimmed glasses square glasses magnifying glasses eventually passing the genetic trait to their daughter she needed glasses by the seventh grade to see the black board thinks it would have been better if she got her mother's confidence but was blessed with her father's vulnerability instead.

## CORN ON THE COB

Chunks of yellow embedded in wire brackets. Mom has braces. Giggling into my straw, chocolate bubbles rise to the rim of my red plastic cup. Let us see. We beg and laugh. I tug the hem of her shirt. Please. Mom holds her lips tight and shakes her head. Dad caresses her chin, tickling her jaw, attempting to pick out the bits with his fingers.

Our butter is always concaved.

## SMELL

A load of laundry right out of the dryer. A bag of popcorn. Arugula. Peppermint and lavender. Gasoline. Thyme. Things described as musty. Washed hair. Hairspray. Coffee. Freshly cut grass. The ocean. Nail polish remover. Vanilla. A wet dog. Logs in a fire. Burnt marshmallows. Paint. Aftershave. Baby's toes. Apple cider. Books. Old books. New books. Rows and rows of books. Hallways and corridors. Snow and mountain tops. Things described as fresh. Insides of shoes. Insides of houses. Tuna sandwiches. Chalkboards. A sharpened pencil. Baby's Breath. Red currants and tire swings. Pavement. Sunny roofs. Rhubarb pies. Dirt.

## DOORKNOB

First thing: Richard stands in the doorway at Oma and Opa's, no not doorway, the archway into the kitchen. Something's not. Mom pulls my hand down the hall, I turn my shoulder to find Dad to make sure he's not. He's not leaving yet, he's coming up the stairs from the foyer towards the kitchen, towards Richard. Mom pulls me into the bedroom and shuts the door. She doesn't turn on the lights, but opens the blinds and sun flickers in. We sit on the edge of the bed, I look up and see ourselves in the mirror above the dresser. Mom's mirror hand grabs the jewelry box. She balances the box on her lap, opens the lid. Fingers sift through golden chains and fresh water pearls. Why is she picking something to wear? Out there, I imagine, Richard's blonde moustache leans against the wooden archway. He's curling the ends, twisting the hair between his thumb and pointing finger. He is the cowboy in Bugs Bunny.

Mom holds two ruby stones to my face so close that my eyes cross. I slide my bum down the edge of the bed. My feet barely touch the carpet when mom catches my ribs with her arm. Do you like these sweetie? Don't you honey? Don't they glitter? Do you want them someday?

Mommy will give them to you.

Where is Dad now? Standing at the top of the stairs? In the kitchen? I try to remember if he kept his shoes on. He undid my laces, what about his? How many steps from the living room to the front door? Five, I think seven. His voice gets louder, so he must be getting closer to the bedroom. Maybe he's changed his mind and is coming to take me home.

My back straightens. I wait for the doorknob to turn. Hoping there's a hand twisting it on the other side. Mom caresses my chin, gently persuading it towards the box. Is there something else in here you like sweetie? Take a look. Dig in. Find anything. She picks bits from the box and lays them on her open palm floating between us.

A thud. The steps. One, two, three, four— five, where's five? Maybe I didn't count right. I slither down the edge of the bed and lunge towards the door. Wait honey. Just stay. But her hands are busy holding boxes and bracelets as I turn the knob. A door slams, is it behind me or in front of me, please, please let it be behind me. I want to wave my arms as I run down the hall, but.

Richard still leans in the archway. I'm moving too fast, but I'm pretty sure he's smirking. Dad's shoes are gone and I keep running across the carpet. My socks are starting to come off but I keep going, past Richard, past the stairs, past the couch until my hands stop my nose from slamming into the window. Cold and wet sticks to my palms. I push my nose against the glass, breath fogs the part around my cheeks. Our powder blue minivan backs out of the driveway. The window's so cold it almost hurts but I don't move. You're not allowed to leave.

## KITCHEN

*Kiiiiit. Chen.* Sounds familiar. I've heard it somewhere. Dad? *Kiiii Chen. Ki. Ch. Nnnnnnnnn.*  
*Ki. Chi. Nnnnn. Ken. Chick. N.*

Of course. It's chicken. Chicken is a thing. It's cooked and eaten in the same room that has a fridge and a table and a sink. It's where dinners and breakfasts and lunches and snacks happen. It's where I eat nuggets with my fingers, dipping them into honey (not ketchup). It's where soup steams on the stove when my nose is runny and I cough. It's where we boil real eggs for eating and sometimes colouring, but never both at the same time. It's where the egg timer sits on the counter. It's not just a timer for eggs, it can be for anything because eggs are from chickens. It's in the shape of an egg with numbers around the middle that say five and ten and fifteen and twenty and it goes on like that. That's called a pattern.

Kitchen? He must have got it confused.



## ROAST BEEF

At daycare, I'm allowed to eat on a plate with compartments. There's a compartment for everything. One for the mashed potatoes, one for the green beans, one for the roast beef. Roast beef sounds like roast beast and I imagine it with an exclamation point at the end like the way the Grinch says it. Forkfuls of gravy-covered roast beast. Someone's here to see you, Mme. Rita whispers and takes my hand. I don't know why she whispers but she does, her hushed voice tickles my ear. Is it a surprise? More like a secret, she says leading me into the hall where Oma stands, clicking her heels against the tile. Mme. Rita lets go and Oma pulls me in, squeezes me into her fur coat. Hairy tips stick to my milky moustache. Stop chewing. I push the roast beast between my molars and cheek. Is it Thursday? I ask. No, Oma says. I just wanted to say hello. But she doesn't actually. Just keeps me wrapped inside the fur. Sways and hums. My tongue fetches the roast beast from behind my teeth. I chew and chew.

Hello.

## CANDLE WAX

I don't remember where we sat at the dining table. I don't remember where we kept Maddie's water dish or our shoes. I don't remember the sound of the doorbell or turning on light switches. I don't remember closing doors or hiding under beds. I don't remember the closet where we kept our coats. I don't remember making forts on the couch, opening the fridge, or holding the banister while coming down the stairs. I don't remember falling down the stairs and splitting open the skin above my right eyebrow. I don't remember crawling up the stairs. I don't remember crawling between two grown people in a king-size bed in the middle of the night. I don't remember reading Mom's magazines upside down. I don't remember doing the dishes in my underwear or needing my pink wicker stool so my hands would reach. I don't remember the backyard and the pool and the sliding door. I don't remember smearing ketchup fingers on the glass. I don't remember the Christmas tree next to the fireplace. I don't remember eating popcorn right out of the bag. I don't remember the red waxy mark on the rug in the dining room. I don't remember flicking it and getting bits stuck underneath my fingernails. I don't remember it being the size of my palm or other drops around it, splattered. I don't remember studying it and it being there for weeks.

## GALOSHES

Mom and I are in the backyard of her house in Montana, clunking around on the twelve-by-twelve patch of grass behind the back door. The grass makes us feel like we're in a backyard but beyond it there's a stretch of dirt and tumbleweed roots and then the mountains. No fence. Just mountains that grow up in dust and disappear in fog or clouds. Sometimes it's hard to tell.

We stomp in circles on our grassy square, chasing each other, tempting to cross the edge. My eight-year-old feet stumble inside a pair of size nine galoshes. I like the word galoshes over rubber boots and say it over and over. *Gaaaloshes*. *Galawwwshes*. *Gloshes*. Mom stops and tells me to pose with my hands in the air. Smile.

The galoshes are black with an orange rim along the bottom. We wear them because of the rattlesnakes.

JAMES TAYLOR

A thin line tilts slightly as it turns. Crackle. I stand in front of the cabinet, my eyes following.

Dad tapes two dimes on top of the needle to keep it from skipping. Crackle.

## A BLINDFOLD

At daycare we learn how to smell. Mme. Rita and Mlle. Natalie blindfold us and we stand in a row on the masking taped Xs on the hardwood floor. I'm fifth from the beginning. Or seventh from the end depending on where they begin. Either way I figure I'm okay because I won't have to go first. I want the blindfold to be made of something distinctive. Silk or nylon perhaps, but I can't feel anything on my face. Maybe they don't blindfold us at all. Maybe we're just told to close our eyes. Squeeze them really tight so that we don't peek.

Vanilla, good. Bravo! Peppermint, mmm yes, good. C'est correcte! They clap. The object is revealed. I squeeze my eyes tighter. If I unclench at all, even just a little bit, they'll open all the way and there will be nothing I can do to stop it. I wouldn't be able to close them again. My eyes would stay open forever. Did he say dirt? That's not right. Wood chips. Ah, oui oui. I'm next, now. An insistent clock ticks beneath my ribs. That smells sour, a voice calls out beside me. Like lemon, yuck. Très bien! I take inventory. Vanilla, wood, lemon. What was the second one? Cinnamon. Peppermint, that's right.

A hand is placed gently across my eyes. It's my turn. What are some smells people smell? Perfume? Coffee? Chocolate? Why I haven't I been taught before? It would be nice if it were chocolate in front of my nose. Chocolate smells like honey tastes like a warm cup of milk feels the same as a warm hand holding my face. Beneath, my eyes open, lashes tickling her palm and all I see is glowing.

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I worry about clogged drains.

Scraped knees and crossing streets.

I worry about stepping on pins.

And needles.

And both at the same time.

I worry about squooshed bologna sandwiches.

Broken lunch pails and making new friends in February.

And leaving friends behind.

Forks falling.

And planes.

And skipping keys.

E flat, G, and C.

I worry about cursive.

I worry about capitals.

I worry about timetables and Mountain and Eastern time zones.

Mother's Day art class.

Plates stacked too high.

I worry about trains on tracks.

Trains coming off tracks from pennies.

I worry about Styrofoam cups and paper cuts.

Fingers in shut doors.

Fingers without fingers.

And staples.

I worry about tornadoes.

Dad disappearing in grocery store aisles.

I worry about spilling milk and Jell-O cubes.

Lunch trays and spaghetti noodles.

And secrets.

I worry about gates left open.

Ghosts.

One stray dog.

## HONEY

Mom has Oma's hands. Five fingers on each. Wrinkled palms and knuckles. Lines sketched in soft skin. Calloused fingertips. Maybe Mom doesn't have wrinkles but I think she does because they both have the same square nail on their index finger. I don't though. Mine have clouds in them, like Dad's.

Some Saturdays he brings me to Oma and Opa's while he goes to work. On really early mornings Oma makes me toast with honey. The sides of her fingers press into crystal heaps as she cuts the slice into four squares. I've never seen honey look like this before. Like candy. Hard and crumbly. I wonder where she gets it. Someplace different. Secret. Special.



## A PHOTOGRAPH

She's wearing the lime green shorts and multicolored striped shirt not a t-shirt though it has short sleeves but a high neck like half of a turtle-neck that her dad bought her when she was six had to have been when she was six because it was the year after she started grade one and her dad picked out dozens of matching outfits for her to wear. She runs around in the backyard in Montana tripping inside a pair of galoshes and her mom runs too with a camera dangling from her neck was it around her neck could have been in her hand if this was before she got the Canon yes this was definitely before then. Smile. She wonders if a rattlesnake does come along and rises in the air like it does when it gets angry and the rattle rattles like it does she wonders then if the galoshes are high enough or if the rattlesnake will catch her thighs above her knees where the boots end.

## A WOODEN PADDLE

Frayed. Stretches of the wood peeled off from decades of navigating through the St. Joseph Channel. Through Devil's Gap and Story Island and Whiskey Rock. I always sit in the front of the boat, the hollowed cushioned part between the steering wheel and the bow. This way I can keep my legs stretched and feel the wind and the sun at the same time. Sometimes Opa turns fast on purpose, cuts into the waves so I get splashed.

The paddle is my job. I keep it at my feet so I can get to it quickly when we go through shallow spots. In these spots we can see the sand on the bottom and schools of minnows scurrying and moldy rocks that are bigger than they look. We have to go through these spots to get to the nook with lily pads. The nook that's in between where there used to be one island but now there's two. A crack. We have to go through these spots to get to the island with old mining equipment. The island with tiny frogs the size of my thumb nail. The island of only birch trees. And puddingstones. When we approach these shallow spots, I crawl towards the bow and kneel, holding the paddle upright, ready, careful not to slide my hands so I won't get slivers this time.

A PONY

My Little. Teaching myself how to braid.

## JELL-O

Dad packs everything in Tupperware. Our fridge is a labyrinth of plastic containers and matching lids. Last night's spaghetti hides behind sliced strawberries. Vanilla yogurt rests on top of mini-carrots. After dinner, Dad mixes and pours blueberry Jell-O into a round, scallop-shaped container to settle overnight for school tomorrow. First day of grade one. At lunch, my fingers fiddle with the rim. I hold the bottom tight against my chest and pull. Pull and tug and tug and pull until. Snap. My hands fumble beneath plastic. Dozens of blue cubes stick to my floral dress.

## A MOUSTACHE

Whiskers, blonde and coarse, wiggle. A twitch in the eye, a pulse that just won't go away. It drives pick-up trucks over rattlesnakes and eats extra-rare steaks and sells mobile homes and vacuum cleaners door-to-door. It collects miniature John Deere tractors, bales and chews hay, and isn't afraid of the coyotes. It drinks whole milk and hangs antlers on the wall and runs away from home at sixteen. It owns horses and convenience stores and refuses to let Mom visit because Windsor is so, so. Flat.

## AN ANSWERING MACHINE

There's a miniature cassette tape inside that records people's messages. Dad makes me say 'au revoir' in our greeting and I say it with my voice going up at the end like singing almost, or asking a question. When I get home after Latchkey, I shake off my Jellies and trip up the stairs to his room, the light flashing red one, two times then pause. Two messages. I kick my heels against the carpet. Dad, are you coming? Can I press it? Dad? I wait minutes. Hours. Five or six at least, until I hear him in the hall. Just wait. Be patient. I sigh and hop on the edge of the bed, wiggling my legs. Now? I ask. I plead. He nods and I press play.

## A PUDDINGSTONE

All stones are beautiful in the water. This is how they are supposed to look; dark and shiny.

Vibrant. Once they dry they become gravel or the stones in the playground at school. I wander carefully along the shore, my toes slipping between the smooth, slick cracks. I never wear shoes at the cottage. My soles become permanently grass-stained. Sand hardens my heels.

My cousins always find flat rocks to skip. They sling their arms forward, propelling the stone perfectly level. It barely grazes the surface and jumps again. And again. James can skip five times. Adam, three. *Swoosh. Skip. Skip. Skip.* I'm lucky if I get two. My throws usually plop and sink. Instead, Mom and I search the shore for puddingstones. Red round bits protrude from grey, making them noticeable beneath the water. Mom goes out farther than I will and comes back with one, fresh and glossy. It just fits inside my palm. I curl my fingers around it, hiding it completely inside my hand and then, slowly, lift one finger at a time to see how many reveal the red. Fingers two and three. I do this again but with the stone positioned differently, always dipping it in the lake first.

## A HAIRBRUSH

Dad starts at the top of my head and runs the brush down until. Knots. Or just one, rather. My entire head. Even though we brush before bedtime, during the night the hair by the back of my neck nests. It weaves. It burrows. I want so badly for him to just put a ponytail in. Daddy, please just a ponytail. No more brushing. He finds an elastic in a drawer in the kitchen. Rests his hands on either side of my temples and pulls my hair back tight to make sure it won't come out at recess.

At school, my teacher cuts the rubber band out in pieces so it doesn't catch and puts in a soft purple one instead.



## REDFISH

Lake. We drive through the mountains in Richard's pick-up truck. Tires almost on the edge. I feel them slipping closer, pushing stones over the cliff. Crumbling down, down, down. *Oh me.* I look out the window and can't see the ground below. We are inside the mist, above the clouds even. *Oh my.* The front windshield swerves with the road, around and around. *From there to here, from here to there.* I should be sitting on the inside, where budding branches find their way through the cracks and cloak — *where do they come from?* I should switch spots with the wicker basket beside me. If my door breaks open from the twisting, beach towels and suntan lotion and magazines and cans of Coca-Cola will tumble out and down. Not me.

Where do they come from? Mom looks up from filing her nails, tilts her head and asks what I'm talking about.

The red fish, I say.

They're salmon and they come from the Pacific Ocean. Dozens of them come this time of year and that's why the lake looks red.

I want her to tell me more. Keep her nail file frozen in air, lips moving. Distracting me from the altitude. Is it altitude or attitude? I can't remember. Only the mist. And the truck turning, going down, down, until. The mist dissolves and the lake, pink and glassy with one, two — there's no way I'll go in the water.

## SMELL

The school gym smells like exercise must smell like sweat and sneakers squeaking against the floor. Laundry smells like meadows smell like a hot cup of Ovaltine tastes. A corridor smells like the moors sound like the inside of a seashell feels against your ear. A wet dog smells like sulphur smells like a sleeping troll snores in an underground cave. Sharpened pencils smell like a book sounds when you first open it. Baby's Breath smells like a tire swing smells like finding a hidden door inside a fence. Rain smells like freshly laid pavement smells like roof shingles sticking to the bottom of your feet. Sometimes rain smells like forests smell like apples sound when you bite into them.

## A HORSESHOE

Mom embroiders every piece of clothing she owns. T-shirts have cacti on the front pocket. Button-up shirts have swirly flower patterns starting at the collarbone going down past the shoulders. Wool socks have a sheriff's badge. Sweaters have saddles.

The first day I get to Montana she starts working on her jean vest. A horseshoe. She's gotten so much better since last summer that she doesn't even need to use a template anymore. Pulls the needle through the denim and the canvas grid again and again, crossing over the previous stitch, creating little squares. Soon the squares won't be squares anymore but a picture — a U. When she's done, she'll let me pull out the frayed ends of the canvas underneath.

## A PUDDINGSTONE

The moment right after. Sitting in the back of my aunt and uncle's van, the seatbelt strapped across my chest digging, pushing into my ribs. My head and tummy are dizzy but don't tingle. A weight tumbles inside my chest but they are not butterflies. My cousins are talking to each other, to my aunt and uncle. My hand squeezes the stone. Don't let go. Don't let fingers acknowledge the faint red bits. I sink further into the seat, further into the crack between the back and bottom. I'm between home and someplace else.

## A LUNCHPAIL

Last year for my birthday, Dad gave me a briefcase for my piano books and the year before that I got a new pair of ice skates and the year before that I don't remember. This year, though, I get a new lunchpail. Purple and white plastic with a lime green button on the side. The button is supposed to be pushed (not like Dad's) so that the top can slide open.

Every school day, Dad packs my lunch inside. The bologna and ketchup sandwich goes in a tupperware so that it doesn't get squooshed by my apple or juice box. Or cookies. A squooshed sandwich is an uneatable sandwich. Especially bologna. Dad cuts the sandwich into four triangles and lifts it carefully so that he doesn't leave a thumb-sized hole in the bread.

The pail doesn't fit in my backpack so I have to carry it to class in the mornings and to Latchkey in the afternoons until Dad picks me up.

## A COMPACT CASSETTE

A missed word. Flight. Left. Just. Not. Be. Mom's voice on the answering machine? Or was it mine on hers or the dentist maybe calling to remind Dad about my appointment. Two miniature spools turning, winding plastic tape. Did she say? You called? The left spool becomes wider than the right. I stop blinking. Two tapes become four and blurry and Mom's at the airport. Standing at the gate as people, one by one, file out of the walkway. Teeters between the heels and balls of her feet, waiting for me to come off a plane I was never on.

## A TRAMPOLINE

Mom's made friends with the neighbours, eight miles down the road. They have nearly five children — they are not all children, some are almost adults. Their house has a lot more toys than Mom's and smells like magic markers smell like perfume might taste if you accidentally sprayed it on your tongue. Their patch of grass is much wider, much longer than ours. The mountains are farther, yet if I stretched out my hand I could still reach. The fog, thick and idling, would sift through the tips of my fingers.

On their patch, there's a tricycle, a Slip-n-Slide, a swing set, a sandbox, multiple trucks and dolls. And a trampoline. We take turns on it, three of us jumping at a time. One of the almost-adults warns me not to jump near the edge. A friend of hers did once and her leg got caught between the metal spring and nylon and she fell and broke her leg or neck. One or the other.

POPCORN

Dad says things smell the way they taste.



## SMELL

School tastes like an eraser tastes like old pencil sharpeners wind like lead shavings smear across your fingertips. A bonfire tastes like cinnamon hearts taste like stones getting stuck inside your shoe. Spring tastes like strawberry jam tastes like rose petals feel against your skin like finding a four-leaf clover in the playground at recess. Mountains taste like ice cubes taste like the word 'abyss' feels inside your mouth. A train tastes like cans of Coke taste like velvet feels against the left side of your face. Home tastes like corn on the cob tastes like a towel feels right out of the dryer like a nightlight glows in the hallway.

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I forget to use a ruler.

Turning off light switches.

I forget straws inside juice boxes.

Used popsicle sticks on counters.

I forget my helmet.

I forget pages fifteen and eighty-three.

I forget receipts in garbage bags.

Shoe laces forget to be tied.

Locker combinations.

Phone numbers.

The last four.

One, eight, seven, nine?

I forget commas.

I forget my name on pages.

I forget i's after e's.

Drawings on desks.

Sharpeners.

Dentist appointments.

Third cousins in pictures.

Indoor shoes.

Indoor voices.

I forget no elbows on tables.

Napkins in laps.

I forget sharps and flats.

Measures ten, fourteen, and thirty-six.

Repeats and second endings and,

I forget to rewind.

I forget nods.

I forget not.

Me. Please don'.

I forget pins in hair behind my ears.

Cards and cushions.

I forget to write.

Phone messages on Post-its.

Return addresses.

I forget froms.

I forget tos.

The last four.

Goodbyes and 646km drives home.

Dozens of plane rides.

I forget to call.

## A PHOTOGRAPH

In the middle of summer could have only been in the summer wearing sneakers and shorts in the snow in the mountains high up in the mountains. Which one again maybe the Rockies probably the Rockies but definitely not the Alps she knows the Alps are in Switzerland because of *Frankenstein*. The car stops. Of course it stops, it has to stop for the pile of snow for the contrast of the running shoes and shorts makes her stand right in it wouldn't it be funny just for a minute she takes off her sweater. Her hair in a ponytail always wore it in a ponytail then didn't know how to use a blowdryer yet her ears exposed and pink from the mountain air. After the snow or maybe before but most likely after they drive by the weeping wall the wall that weeps fresh water from the snow that does melt the alliteration she remembers the alliteration. They only drive by. Keep with traffic moving moving even though she wants to stop and get out and see the leaking dripping poetic wall for more than just two seconds out of a rolled down window.

A PONY

Theoretical. She uses it to bribe me to come live in Montana.

## A COMIC BOOK

In the mornings before school I sit at the kitchen table, eating Cheerios and reading *Jughead's Double Digest*. I'm always cold in the mornings and keep a quilt wrapped around my shoulders and tucked under my armpits so that the rest of my arms (all the way down to my hands) are free to hold books and spoons and mugs of hot Ovaltine. Eventually, with practice, my thumb becomes an expert in pinning and flipping pages.

Betty and Veronica are at it again and Jughead doesn't care and sometimes I don't either. I don't understand why they never get mad at Archie or why they like him so much to begin with. I wish so badly that Betty had brown hair instead of Veronica. But I like Jughead because his jokes are the funniest and he gave pizza to a homeless man (although I do wish he was nicer to Ethel). I keep reading. I turn pages faster than I spoon cereal and Dad reminds me.

## BUBBLES

I hope you won't find a small town like Riverdale too boring. He seems rather nerdish. I was practicing for a phone call I need to make. I'll be. Practicing. It's a little late, though. As long as there's snacks, I'll be there. And maybe some ice cream. He seems rather. Gulp. Jughead, oh, please forgive my lack of respect for your eminent self. Giggle. Don't get carried away. Times have. Archiekins. I bet they have everything. Hamburgers and ice cream and candy and chili dogs and cake. Hmmph. Don't panic. Yeah. Cake. I can't help but feel. Won't find a small town like. My book says. I'd be happier if. I was practicing. Times have changed. As long as. I, my friend, can offer nothing but contrition for my inane remarks. Gee. Once we. A little late. Reminds me of. There are no poisonous snakes in this area. Jughead, oh. Please forgive. Could easily take his place. My friend. That redheaded goofus. Don't worry. I'd be happier if we could find some food.

## YELLOW HEADPHONES

In Montana, I like to wash floors. Wipe soapy hands against my Detroit Red Wings t-shirt before fast-forwarding my walkman to “Sunday Morning”. Shuffle across the kitchen floor, toes bouncing relentlessly. Pushing, pulling the mop to 4/4 time. Trumpets and drums pulse through the two yellow bits in my ears. Throw my head back on the upbeat, then down again. Push. Pull. So many tiles. Each square is brown with a border. Some have a diagonal line on the right. Some on the left. Some top. Some bottom. The sponge squeezes and slides over them. Pieces of a puzzle I can pretend to pull apart. Peel and stack into the box they could have been shipped in. Sealed. I memorize the pattern, and begin to pull them out again. One by one I turn them until they fit.



## COWBOY HATS

Richard has dozens of them. Hundreds, maybe. Beige and black suede. Dark brown leather.

Some have a braided piece around the base. Or a silver pin.

When putting on or taking off the hat, you are only ever allowed to use four fingers to hold the front and back of the brim, he tells me. Not the top. Never the top. It's deceiving the way it's curved, the indents look as though they are made to fit the shape of your hand. But this is a trick.

A sneaky way to separate those who regularly wear cowboy hats and those who do not.

In restaurants, he takes his hat off just so and places it on the table, upside down so the brim doesn't lose its shape. Ketchup drops out of glass bottles and salt scatters beside our plates.

Glasses of wine sway. Food-covered forks twirl. I wonder where he stores them all.

## BUG SPRAY

There's four of us on the boat: Opa, James, Adam, and I. Opa stands at the back near the motor with the pail of water and perch and pickerel but no bass. Bass don't taste very good so Opa throws those ones back. Adam and James take up the middle. Adam sits in front of the steering wheel so he can move the boat back once we've drifted too much. And I, I get the front to myself, where there's cushions and a fish-shaped pillow and Oma's knitted blanket. I keep my feet stretched out towards the front, the point where the two sides of the boat meet and make an arrow. I keep the fish pillow tucked between my back and the windshield (is it a windshield?) so it doesn't fly away, and also so I don't have to lean against the hard surface. One hand holds the fishing rod while the other pulls the sort of invisible line, tightening, loosening, teasing. This is why I won the loonie. We're still fishing, despite it starting to get dark, since there's just too many nooks, too many good spots to find before dinner so Opa plugs in the lantern at the back of the boat.

But it's not completely dark yet, the sky pink and orange reflecting on the water which is still and quiet even though Opa swears there's hundreds of fish beneath waiting and hungry.

Ouch. A mosquito bites the skin near my jaw. Immediately my hand lifts, clenches and scratches. I can already feel the bump swelling. Mosquito bites grow and grow leaving a massive red bulge on my skin for days, weeks even. A goose's egg that Oma has to drench in vinegar to stop the itching.

Opa digs through the basket Oma packed and pulls out the orange aerosol can. We all stand in a huddle in the middle of the boat and take turns covering each other's back sides. The spray envelopes us, I can see it linger, stuck in the air. James and Adam wave their arms about coughing. That smells disgusting. Gross. I can't breathe. They move about quickly, too quickly, I just know they've scared away all the fish. Can't you smell that? I don't make a fuss and they notice.

I can't, remember.

They laugh and nod, oh yeah, that's so weird. I expect questions to follow, the usual questions, the how do you taste or the what do you mean or the you can't smell anything or the I don't understand. But they don't. They just let out another chuckle and I settle back into my spot in the front, check to make sure no one is looking and lift my repellent-covered hand to my lips, stick out my tongue and lick.

## 500 MILES

Mom and I listen to The Proclaimers on her stereo system in the living room while I curl my toes against the carpet propelling the chair to circle. Fast. *Da da lat da. Da da lat da.* We try to sing in Scottish accents and spin until I'm so dizzy that when I try to stand I trip over my own feet and fall on the carpet and rug-burn my knees.

## WINDSHIELD WIPERS

Backing out of Oma and Opa's driveway about to head to figure skating, it starts to rain. Dad twists the knob to his left and the wipers swat away heavy droplets on our windshield. Left right. Wait. Left right. Wait. Rain hits the glass with no consideration for the rhythm. I try to count how many droplets land before the wipers clear them but there's too many and it's coming down too fast.

This is when I started swearing.

I think I invent the word 'damn.' In the bathroom before we leave, I hear someone say 'darn' and I say it over so many times in my head that it turns from darn to dawn to dean to dan to damn. I do it again but using my mouth this time. I know there's a difference between saying something inside my head and out loud through my mouth, now. If I don't actually move my lips, my voice goes backwards, up behind my nose and eyeballs and into my brain where only I can hear it.

*Daaaarn, daaaaawn*, My vowels stretch, sustaining the length of one swipe. Right left. *Deeeeean*. Right left. *Daaaaaan*. Wait.

Can you believe this damn rain? I say to Dad, using my voice.

## A VELVET ARMCHAIR

The arm, specifically, supports my four-year-old feet as I dance on the sleeve. No motive other than the feel of velvet against the bottoms of my feet. Slide, kick. Slide, kick. The 's' is prolonged, my tongue stays pushed up against the inside of my teeth. *Sssssssssssss*. For hours, maybe, until my tongue pulls back. Leg kicks and. Slips.

The thud makes Oma come running from the kitchen, where goulash simmers on the stove. Her house always smells like a knitted afghan feels wrapped around your shoulders. She hurries back into the kitchen and I cry through breaths coming out of my nose so I can hear who she's calling. I wait for her to dial. I wait for the turn of the rotary, the clicks. Click. Click. I know she's calling home.

## COWBOY BOOTS

Walking on a floor, hardwood or tile, maybe, but not carpet. No. The sound. Steady like a line of chalk being drawn on asphalt. Like a glass of milk being set on a wooden tabletop. Like closing a drawer and trying not to let it slam shut. The feel of your fingers between open and close. Or like being able to close one eye at a time but slowly so it is clear you are not winking, but merely exercising the ability to do so. Cowboy boots sound like musk smells. Or leather left out in the sun. Cowboy boots sound like all of these things. To me, they are the same.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I miss puddles.

I miss curbs.

I miss birthdays in July.

My feet miss skips in ropes.

In hopscotch.

Rubber balls bounce amiss.

I miss Friday afternoons.

I miss funny voices at bedtime.

Hockey cards in boxes of cereal.

I miss stairs (going up but not down).

I miss painting with fingers.

Dried paint between fingers.

Beneath my fingernails.

I miss cracks in sidewalks.

One deadline.

I miss stop signs hidden behind Birch trees.

Street names miss me.

I miss sleepovers and first recess and second grade.

Folded notes in lunch boxes.



Sentences but never fragments. Never.

I miss footnotes.

Sidenotes.

Inbetweennotes.

F sharps and clef changes.

I miss volleyball tryouts.

I only miss breakfast twice.

Molars and Bicuspid.

Exclamation points.

I miss bedtimes.

I miss old couches.

Waves and three hellos.

I miss out on.

## A POCKETKNIFE

S'mores are Mom's favourite part about the cottage. Normally on our drive up we stop at the general store for the ingredients: marshmallows, Hershey's chocolate, and graham crackers. This year, though, Dad drove half-way and Oma and Opa drove the rest because Mom is coming later. I ask Opa if we can wait, maybe, and have the bonfire another night once Mom gets here. He says it is supposed to rain tomorrow and asks if I can roast him a marshmallow, perfect and golden and only slightly crisp. It's quite the task, he adds, not to let it catch on fire. My eyes go big.

We've already found long, sturdy branches to use for roasting so Opa pulls out his pocketknife and hands it to me. My thumbnail catches the ridge on the outer (not sharp) part of the blade and I snap it out. Hold the branch between my knees securely and slice bark off the tip. Carve away, always away. This will prove girls can do anything.

## SPURS

Richard drops them in a plate by the door. Rusted rowels swirl and clink against the ceramic diamond pattern.

Always dull and dusted with sand and grass. I don't know what they're for, hear the word 'cufflinks' one day and spend years thinking they are the same thing.

## SHOW-N-TELL

On Wednesdays in grade three, we take turns. Berenstain Bears and model airplanes. Postcards and Hot Wheels. Leonardo, Donatello, Michelangelo, and Raphael. Pound Puppies and Beanie Babies and Cabbage Patch Kids. Skip-it and beaded bracelets. Archie and X-Men and Disney signatures. Power Rangers and Glitter Hair Barbie. 3D puzzles. Painted sunsets and seashells. On my Wednesday I bring her. She comes in the portable door and rubs the soles of her black leather boots against the red wool felt mat. She smiles wide enough for me to see her teeth. Her one tooth, the one next to the front ones, sticks out a little because she doesn't wear her retainer any more. She reads Robert Munsch to twenty cross-legged nine-year-olds. *Stephanie's Ponytail* or *Thomas' Snowsuit*. Her voice, almost a whisper. Almost and not at all like Dad's at bedtime. Even then, his voice carries. Mom's here is soft, as if what she says is only meant for you to hear and no one else. Mrs. Bachetti says it's nice to have a real, live person in for show-n-tell. That's right, I think. She is a real, live person.

## POPPYSEED DUMPLINGS

Plop, plop, plop into the pot. Oma doesn't stop me from stuffing my tiny belly. Lets me eat on the couch, balancing the plate on my lap while *I Love Lucy* plays on the television. More, more.

Four o'clock in the morning, Dad wakes up to me kneeling against the edge of his bed and lumps of creamy dough seeping through his sheets. He doesn't eat oatmeal for a month.

## A LEATHER COUCH

Even in Windsor, most nights I dream about acoustic guitars and western twang. Belt buckles that double as weapons. Songs that always have a story. Rope that ties into knots. Coyotes and mountain lions. Cowboy boots and spur jingles. Slow and distinct. Clink. Clink. Clink. Horse shoes and saddle blankets. Tumbleweed and dirt that never leaves the deepest folds of the inside of my backpack. During the six weeks I'm in Montana, I watch *Lonesome Dove* eleven times. I keep a tally. Anxious for the fifth in order to strike that horizontal line. Every night I fall asleep on the leather couch to country music videos, with the remote control in my hand. I adjust the volume repeatedly, lowering it each time to match the stage of sleep my ears are in. At this house, I don't have my own room so instead I bury myself inside cold cushions (leather never warms).

## SUBTITLES

Well. The first man comes along that can read Latin is welcome to rob us, far as I'm concerned. I'd like a chance to shoot at an educated man once in my life. Still just life. See. Only healthy way to live life is to. Yeah, I forgot. I forgot how determined he can get. Once an idea takes root. Let's go on and go. Graze cattle in Montana, even if it kills all of us. Well, maybe it's not. Yeah. Learn to like all the little everyday. A soft bed. I reckon you can find Texas. Of course I can find Texas, Peach. Don't seem. I 'spect you been sittin' up all night reading. Here's to sunny slopes of long ago. I forgot how. Everyday things you see. A glass of buttermilk. Things sure have changed since the last time I was here. It's all growed up. All. The little everyday things, you see. Yeah. I forgot. This is a bad bunch we're after. Expect he's up on the Canadian somewhere. Learn to. The only healthy way. You see? If you want any one thing too badly, it's likely to turn out to be a disappointment. Let's go on and go if we're goin'. Maybe it's not as big a change as we think.

## A VACUUM

At Latchkey, I help clean so that Miss Jenna can go home when Dad gets here.



## A SWING

There's a time, one time, my Mom and Aunt almost fight at the park. I don't remember this happening but I'm told it did and a policeman had to come and I'm not sure. I think about it often and try and try and try and then. I see myself, sitting on the rubber swing not swinging, but keeping my hands latched around the metal links. Two voices by the fence far enough away that I can't hear what they're saying but can feel the shakiness of the vowels.

Maybe I could try and look for a four-leaf clover? There's some grass over by the basketball court, I could wander. Investigate. I figure there has to be one out there somewhere. Then I could bring it home and show Dad and we could press it in our *Webster's Dictionary* (it's the largest book we own) between two pieces of waxed paper for a few days and then he could get it framed. And I could keep it on my dresser by my bed so I feel lucky every morning when I wake up.

## A LETTER

The envelope, square and thin, rests in my palms, unopened. It feels as though I'm holding nothing at all. Air. Dust, perhaps. Not the kind you find in the creases of curbs or the spots underneath your bed where the vacuum doesn't reach. But a dust that shimmers, almost. Where light hits and bounces. A kaleidoscope ceiling.

I turn the envelope over. It's licked and sealed but there's still a sticker of a cat in the centre. My nose crinkles, pushing my cheeks into the bottom rim of my glasses. Cats.

## *THE*

After school, Dad and I practice my words. He holds a stack of flashcards in front of his chest and I say each one out loud (the trick is to say it out loud) and each time I do he pinches the side of the card and adds it to the back of the pile. *They. She. He.* The letters blocky. *This. That. Go.* I name each one without thinking, I just know. I know how to say *play* and *here* and *book*. I know the difference between *there* and *their* and *they're*. I know that *there is a hat* on a hook. I know that it's *their hat* and that now *they're wearing the hat*. I know all kinds of words except. I stumble. But it's the easiest one! I stare and I think and Dad waits for me to sound it out. *Th.* *Thhhh.* Stick my tongue between my top and bottom teeth and blow. Like whistling without moving my lips. But what about the e? I know it doesn't sound like the e in *they* or *then*. It's different, but I can never remember.

## SOUR GREEN GRAPES

Hanging from the porch, intertwined, wrapped inside Oma's stockings. Thin and beige protects each bundle from birds and caterpillars. I reach for the knot at the bottom to open one and she tells me to just use my fingers to pull and tear. Your nails, she says, but I don't have any, Dad keeps them cut short for piano practice. She scoffs or laughs maybe, and pink polish pinches and punctures, pulling the nylon. She lets me pluck as many as I want. I take six or so, they're big and cool from the shade, and the insides make my tongue shudder.

## A LETTER

How are you? You sounded really good last time I talked to you. We are very happy that you get to play with your cousins at Oma and Opa's. Richard and I are doing very good but we both miss you very much. There are a lot of little girls and boys around us because we are very close to the school and we know a lot of Moms and Dads. We always think about how much fun you will have! We are looking forward to it. Bye for now honey. We love you very much.

## A LASSO

Rope coils in dirt. A perfect circle. We're away from the back door, away from the patch of grass. I'm wearing my galoshes, Mom insisted even though Richard says we're fine. He has a pitchfork nearby and three or four rattles in a wooden box in the shed. Keepsakes, he calls them.

Mom stays by the door, just in case.

Richard holds out his arms. Left hand stays palm down, he says, and grips the loop between his thumb and pointing finger. He adjusts his boots, making a dust pillow circle around his ankles.

Now, my right hand's palm faces up and grips the loop the same. See? My three fingers here on the end. Wiggles suede fingers.

I think I hear something behind me and twist my head. I do this quickly, without thinking, and with a short gasp, also without thinking. Richard pauses and we both stare at the ground. It's bare, mostly. Scattered straw. Wind whisks underneath. The wind. Always creaking. Always scurrying. That whistle stays nestled in my skull for months.

Now watch, Richard says pulling my chin back towards him. The rope begins to turn and lift until it's swirling so fast I can barely see it at all.

## APPLE TREES

In October, Dad takes me apple picking in the county. Rows of Granny Smith and Honeycrisp.

Ten, eleven feet high. Each tree a catacomb of Alice's playing cards and Dorothy's slippers. The Red Delicious are still wet and drip paint onto the ground. Must be fresh.

Dad lifts me up so I can reach the tallest branch. I stretch out my arm, only halfway and pause.

Wait to see if the branch moves towards me, grabs hold of my wrist. I wouldn't want to offend it.

That one, there, Dad says. Looks perfect. Pick that one. I wrap my hand around the apple and tug. Tug harder. Snap. Dad lowers my feet back to the ground so I can place the apple in our basket. I check my palm for paint.

We always bring home too many for the two of us.

## A PHOTOGRAPH

Sepia. Discovers what this word means from her dad's video camera while making a movie with her friends for art class must have been for art class she can choose between black and white of course or mosaic or sketch but decides on sepia. Uses it for the flashback scenes the way the word seems to perfectly describe the reddish-brown hue like old Victorian pictures and the one she has of her parents with matching haircuts, impossible to separate whose curls belong to who the colour the same just like hers. She tapes the edges to protect it. She's obsessed with laminating right now and laminates everything laminates name tags for her dad to wear to work and coupons for doing her chores and labels for all of the drawers in the kitchen. Uses her dad's good scotch tape the kind that tears smoothly and evenly not the kind that twists and sticks to itself she tries to only let her the very corner of her finger touch the tape but still she can't help it and the circular lines from her skin stays fixed between.



## A WINDOW

One summer I take the train from Detroit to Montana. Or do I leave from somewhere closer? But why would I? Either way, it takes days to get to Mom's, and there's hardly anyone else on the train so I get the whole row to myself. The seats are red velvet, I'm sure, the material, brushing against my left ear and cheek and neck as I look out the window, boarded-up buildings becoming evergreens turning into fields of hay and cows grazing and horses roaming and sometimes rivers and mountains slowly getting taller and taller.

I sleep.

My friends at home are having movie nights and pool parties and writing letters to each other in code. We just learned how to do this. From school, maybe, someone's older sister, or from the *Secret World of Alex Mack*. Each word and letter has to be written backwards so that only a mirror can reveal the secret message. The only words that can't be secret are 'wow' and 'mom' because they're the same both ways so we never use them. We pass the notes to each other when Mrs. Small writes on the board. Sneak bathroom breaks to find out the plan for afternoon recess. Spend hours before bedtime writing the sideways sticks for F on the left instead of the right. For me, S is always the hardest.

When I wake up I yawn and shiver and slide my arms back into the sleeves of my jean-jacket. The window is foggy. Blurred. Is this condensation? I straighten my glasses, push them back up my nose a little and lift my hand towards the glass.

Wait. Think.

I bend my finger back and forth, up and down, drawing the air, planning it out before. Slowly pushing my fingertip against the far left side of the glass. Slide to make a circle, clock-wise. Then lift and draw a line down and left. Lift, again. Line down and left. I rub my thumb against my pointing finger to get rid of the moisture. Press. Line down, left, left, left. Lift. Press. The last one, irreversible like the ones we don't use but it's okay because it's just one letter by itself.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I find Honeycrisp apples.

Seashells and paper clips.

Purple beads in bins.

Glass beads from bracelets.

Six rose petals.

I find sepia pictures.

I find stamps in drawers.

Popcorn kernels and skipping ropes.

Dust bunnies and tic tac toes.

I find x's but never o's.

I find five red crayons.

One chair in the tenth row.

Marshmallows in mugs of Ovaltine.

Forts under dining tables.

Under jackets.

Between chairs.

I find thirds of braids.

Sticks and several flat rocks.

Loose pieces of string.

Broken pieces of white chalk.

I find streets and corners to other streets.

I find hours.

Questions find answers.

I find lids without bottoms.

Four single earrings.

I find sand in suitcases.

I find socks behind dryers.

Socks beneath sheets.

Socks in backs of drawers.

I find vowels.

O.

I find one licked envelope.

Letters find me.

## A DREAMCATCHER

Dad hangs one from the ceiling light above my bed. Unscrews the knob that holds the glass part up and wedges suede between the two. Snatches bad dreams in a web of blue waxed thread and tiny crystal beads, keeps them away from my pillow, away from the behinds of my eyes so that. I can sleep.

The moment right before. Lying flat, legs straight, arms at my side. Dad pulls the comforter up to my chin and tucks it beneath my shoulders and elbows so that I'm snug. Rolled up like a rug in a cocoon. A rug as snug as a bug.

“The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of the intellect,  
in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us)  
which we do not suspect.”

— Marcel Proust, “Swann’s Way”

“It seems to me that a child must have a curious focus; it sees an air-ball or shell  
with extreme distinctness.”

— Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*

LEFT DAD FOR A COWBOY:  
RECONCILING THE DICHOTOMIES OF MEMORY

Memory is a tricky thing. It can be fickle and trustworthy at the same time. It can suddenly fill your ears with the sounds of a crackling record you heard when you were five. It can, without warning, bring to life images of corn stuck in your mother's braces. But it can also leave your hands feeling empty, your mouth dry. Blank. In her autobiographical essay, "A Sketch of the Past," Virginia Woolf asks, "[w]hy have I forgotten so many things that must have been, one would have thought, more memorable than what I do remember? Why remember the hum of bees in the garden going down to the beach, and forget completely being thrown naked by my father into the sea?" (70). Often our minds can remember seemingly pedestrian moments from our past but cannot recall consequential ones. I remember being unable to pronounce the word 'the' but can't remember my mother and aunt almost getting into a fist fight. At times our imaginations can fill in the gaps: the in-between spots we don't remember. Our individual experiences of the world through our senses (or lack thereof), imaginations, languages, and subjective associations of external objects, construct the way we interpret our pasts, our presents, and our identities. How, then, can autobiographical texts effectively illustrate all of these considerations? What obligations do we have, if any, to articulate the distinction between past and present, imaginary and true, ordinary and significant? In turn, how does the act of narration—the language we use to describe our memories—shape the way we remember them? *Left Dad for a Cowboy* attempts to reconcile all of these aspects of memory by portraying both the sensory experiences of my childhood and the precarious process of remembering.

## A DIARY

When I was four years old my mother divorced my father and moved to Montana with a man she had just met (I'm not sure how). Actually, I don't even know why I always think my parents divorced when I was four; that number seems to stick in my mind. The truth is, my parents divorced when I was two-and-a-half. However, the next year or so was spent negotiating between lawyers until my dad had nearly no money left and was finally awarded custody of me and my mom moved away. From the age of four to my teenage years, I only saw my mother for six weeks each summer. This situation lends a certain elusiveness to my memories. My childhood was spent divided, although not equally, between being my father's daughter in a Canadian urban setting and a girl visiting her mother in United States' rural west. As a consequence of divorce, I was constantly pulled back and forth between parents. In some situations, I was not told anything; in other situations I was told too much. The synopsis I've provided above is a combination of facts I remember experiencing and ones I am told. I cannot be sure about either.

In *Left Dad for a Cowboy* I strive to engage with two types of memory. In "Memory for the Events of the Childhood," Doctor of Psychology, Madeline J. Eacott defines these categories as semantic and episodic. While "episodic memory involves recollection of a personally experienced event ('I remember X'), semantic memory lacks this recollection of a personally experienced event ('I know X' or 'I believe X')" (47). When I first began composing this project, I wanted to keep these types of memory separate. It was my desire to write independent poems that distinguished the memories I distinctly remember experiencing from the memories I believe



or had been told occurred. Soon, I realized that this separation was impossible to achieve since our minds can often negotiate between both types of memory within a single experienced event. While I can specifically remember the hairs from a fur coat sticking to my milk moustache or how my hands and nose felt pressed against the glass of a window, other aspects of the same memories remain uncertain. As a result, I attempted to combine these two types of memories, switching between them within one poem. In “A Trampoline,” for example, I remember the specific toys that the neighbours possessed, and even the exact distance they lived from my mom, yet my memory of the number of children in the family or the way in which the friend injured herself on the trampoline is doubtful, expressed with phrases like “they have nearly five children” and “she fell and broke her leg or neck” (32). One of the poems that perhaps most prominently illustrates this perpetual conversion between episodic and semantic memory is “Candle Wax”:

I don't remember where we sat at the dining table. I don't remember where we kept Maddie's water dish or our shoes. I don't remember the sound of the doorbell or turning on light switches. I don't remember closing doors or hiding under beds. I don't remember the closet where we kept our coats. I don't remember making forts on the couch, opening the fridge or holding the banister while coming down the stairs. I don't remember falling down the stairs and splitting open the skin above my right eyebrow. I don't remember crawling up the stairs. I don't remember crawling between two grown people in a king-size bed in the middle of the night. I don't remember reading Mom's magazines upside down. I don't remember doing the dishes in my underwear or needing my pink wicker stool so my hands would reach. I don't remember the backyard and the pool and the

sliding door. I don't remember smearing ketchup fingers on the glass. I don't remember the Christmas tree next to the fireplace. I don't remember eating popcorn right out of the bag. I don't remember the red waxy mark on the rug in the dining room. I don't remember flicking it and getting bits stuck underneath my fingernails. I don't remember it being the size of my palm or other drops around it, splattered. I don't remember studying it and it being there for weeks.

Here, the poem uses parallelism with “I don't remember” as the opening phrase of each sentence, emphasizing the fine line that exists between these two types of memory. While “I don't remember” declares that episodic memory is lacking, the details such as “making forts on the couch” and “falling down the stairs and splitting open the skin above my right eyebrow” suggest a level of semantic memory: events that I've either been told or have evidence of in the present (i.e. a scar above my right eyebrow). However, even the acknowledgement of these types of memory proves to be complicated. As the poem progresses the precision of the ‘denied’ memories evolve to a point where it becomes difficult for the reader—and myself, even—to determine which memories the speaker directly remembers experiencing and which ones have been formulated from other sources.

#### A CUE-CARD

While working on this project, Virginia Woolf's “A Sketch of the Past” greatly influenced my understanding of the relationship between memory and written work. In this autobiographical essay, Woolf streams in and out of her present life and childhood memories while at the same time contemplating the very nature of life writing. She says, “whatever the reason may be, I find

that scene making is my natural way of marking the past. A scene always comes to the top; arranged; representative” (142). Like Woolf, I do not remember my life as a linear narrative. When I think back to my childhood, I remember bits and pieces, moments and images that stand out, and therefore it seems advantageous to explore these memories within the genre of prose poetry. This is a genre that allows for short, distinct portrayals of discrete scenes or images, similar to vignettes or pieces of flash-fiction, the nature of which allows the author to indulge in a heightened awareness of sensory detail—detail which is vital to the process of remembering.

While prose poetry existed uncoded for centuries in the Old Testament, fables, folk tales, parables, and perhaps even Chinese ‘rhyme-prose,’ the French poet Charles Baudelaire was the first to give the form a more concrete definition (Benedikt 42-3). In the introduction to his collection *Paris Spleen*, Baudelaire contemplates the essence of prose poetry: “Which one of us, in his moments of ambition, has not dreamed of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical, without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of reverie, the jibes of conscience?” (ix-x). Even though it can be a difficult genre to define, it is fair to say that prose poetry borrows from the stylistic qualities of both prose and poetry. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* usefully defines the prose poem as:

A composition able to have any or all the features of the lyric, except that it is put on the page – though not conceived of – as prose. It differs from poetic prose in that it is short and compact, from free verse in that it has no line breaks, from a short prose passage in that it has, usually, more pronounced rhythms, sonorous

effects, imagery, and density of expression. It may contain even inner rhyme and metrical runs. (Delville 2)

In his introduction to *The Prose Poem: An International Anthology*, Michael Benedikt offers an insightful discussion of the closeness between the nature of our minds and the structure of prose poetry. He explains that the mind “does not function in conventional poetic patterns—least of all in terms of rhyme or even meter, whether strict or ‘free.’ The mind prefers, rather, to structure in terms of imagery” (42). Similar to Woolf’s description of “a scene always coming to the top,” and Baudelaire’s own impression of the form, Benedikt’s reasoning here suggests that the mind functions within visually descriptive modes.

Many of the prose poems in *Left Dad for a Cowboy* are structured so that each depicts a particular scene or image. Since my trips to Montana took place over several years, I do not remember everything as one collective remembrance. Instead, I remember single moments like Richard teaching me ‘roping’ or falling asleep on a leather couch watching *Lonesome Dove*. It is interesting, too, that even though I know I watched that movie eleven times one summer at various times throughout the morning, day, and night, only one image ever comes to mind: my body sinking into a cold leather couch and falling asleep with the remote control in my hand, dreaming of western clichés. The poem “A Leather Couch” is meant to illustrate that particular scene through images such as “acoustic guitars,” “[b]elt buckles that double as weapons,” and “spur jingles” (55).

Benedikt also recognizes that “the prose poem may . . . depend especially on rhythmic repetition, and sometimes rhyme and meter: not necessarily strict rhyme or meter, even as it

appears in ‘free’ verse, but rhyme and meter nevertheless. These elements may be developed through the poem in rhythmically echoing strophes—musical *passages*, as opposed to *lines*” (47). The “Smell” poems in my project venture to perform “musical passages” in the way Benedikt describes:

The school gym smells like exercise must smell like sweat and sneakers squeaking against the floor. Laundry smells like meadows smell like a hot cup of Ovaltine tastes. A corridor smells like the moors sound like the inside of a seashell feels against your ear. A wet dog smells like sulphur smells like a sleeping troll snores in an underground cave. Sharpened pencils smell like a book sounds when you first open it. Baby’s Breath smells like a tire swing smells like finding a hidden door inside a fence. Rain smells like freshly laid pavement smells like roof shingles sticking to the bottom of your feet. Sometimes rain smells like forests smell like apples sound when you bite into them. (27)

These poems depend on rhythmic repetition to accentuate or make sense of the logical leaps occurring in my childhood thought process. The repeated rhythmic unit “smells like” attempts to make associations among seemingly disconnected images in order to understand a sense to which I do not have access to. In a way, the ‘smells like’ phrases act like a line of falling dominos within my mind: one image reminds me of another image, which reminds me of another. As a child, corridors seemed mysterious to me, for example. I saw them as full of secrets, books, and adventure. This corridor image, thanks to Romantic and Victorian literature (specifically Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*), led me to imagine the moors. Since I have never been to the moors, I connect the way I imagine them to sound to something I have experienced—wind swooshing and echoing inside of a seashell. The stylistic qualities of the prose poem—the

syntactical liberties it allows and its ‘pronounced rhythms, sonorous effects, imagery, and density of expression’—render it an effective mode of expressing memory.

#### CILANTRO

It seems necessary, in exploring the nature of memory, to discuss the role of sensory detail. In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf’s earliest memories are almost entirely expressed through the senses. In early childhood our experience of the world is predominantly influenced by our own physical, sensual interaction with it: as Woolf describes, “I am hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation...Perhaps this is a characteristic of all childhood memories; perhaps it counts for their strength” (67). Throughout my project, I am attentive to portraying the special position our senses occupy in childhood memories. In detailed passages regarding sound, touch, taste, sight, and (to an extent) smell, I strive to emphasize the important role senses play in making our memories concrete. Descriptions of sensory apprehension transform my recollections into something tangible: the sour taste of green grapes, the pain of a wood sliver in my palm, the soft brush of velvet against the bottom of my feet.

In his commentary on Aristotle’s *De Memoria et Reminiscentia*, Richard Sorabji notes that “Aristotle believes that very few things can exist separately from the sensible world. So objects of thought need a sensible vehicle. And a convenient vehicle is the sensible form, which exists in external physical objects, and which during perception is transferred to one’s sense-organs” (6). The objects that title the prose poems in *Left Dad for a Cowboy* are meant to act as triggers for these sensory details. “A Puddingstone” induces the physical experience of holding the stone in my hand, the look of it wet from the lake. This dynamic is dramatically illustrated in

Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, a 1985 documentary featuring Holocaust survivors. In an interview, one survivor recounts his job as a barber for a concentration camp, cutting the hair of prisoners before they were sent to the gas chambers. So distanced from his actual sensory experience, the memory is more of a rehearsed narrative that he is able to tell without emotional consequence. However, when asked about the colour of the tiles in the room, or the length of his scissors, he breaks down. The physicality of the experience forces him to relive it. The small sensorily potent details transform the memory into something concrete and terrifyingly real.

When examining the ways in which sensory detail propels our memory, it is important to note that “olfactory-cued memories are typically from early childhood and frequently have strong emotional loads” (Croy 1331). It seems that smell is the sense most intimately connected to our memory, often carrying a significant amount of meaning. I cannot smell. While I am not sure why this is, I know that I have had no sense of smell for my entire life. Consequently, I do not even possess some prior knowledge that would allow me to hypothesize what something might smell like. Instead, I depend on my other senses in order to understand smell, as illustrated in the “Smell” poems in my manuscript. In these poems, I negotiate how something might smell through taste, sound, sight, and touch. It is often my imagination that links the invented smell to these other senses, creating images that I associate with the feeling the smell provokes rather than the actual scent it produces. In navigating this issue, I eventually found myself pondering the reverse: how a feeling or an abstraction might elicit a specific smell. How might a place or a season or a feeling smell? Since I do not have a sense of smell, the final “Smell” piece in my project requires the mediation of the other senses to the point that only the title itself suggests the representation of that particular sense:

School tastes like an eraser tastes like old pencil sharpeners wind like lead shavings smear across your fingertips. A bonfire tastes like cinnamon hearts taste like stones getting stuck inside your shoe. Spring tastes like strawberry jam tastes like rose petals feel against your skin like finding a four-leaf clover in the playground at recess. Mountains taste like ice cubes taste like the word 'abyss' feels inside your mouth. A train tastes like cans of coke taste like velvet feels against the left side of your face. Home tastes like corn on the cob tastes like a towel feels right out of the dryer like a nightlight glows in the hallway. (34)

#### AN HOURGLASS

I cannot ignore the fact that I wrote these poems in the present. While I can situate myself as a four- or six- or nine-year-old within the specific moments of my childhood, I am also a twenty-four-year-old woman looking back on these events with the ability to interpret, shape, and describe them varyingly. In their article, "Autobiographical Subjects," Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson state that "memory researchers from fields as diverse as neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and philosophy have argued, remembering involves a reinterpretation of the past in the present" (22). Often my present voice slips into the lines of my poems. A sudden awareness that could only exist from a future perspective sneaks in, so that there results a constant conversation between past and present. In "A Comic Book," the sentence, "Eventually, with practice, my thumb becomes an expert in pinning and flipping pages" (39) offers an interpretation of the scene that could not have existed at the particular moment in which the scene takes place. Rather, my present voice suggests that this action of reading at the table during



breakfast is a routine that continues long after the poem ends. The present disappears just as quickly as it moves in and the poem continues in the childlike voice of analyzing the content of the comic book.

In Woolf's "A Sketch of the Past," the past experiences and the present recounting of these moments are always bound together. She describes:

Those moments—in the nursery, on the road to the beach—can still be more real than the present moment . . . I can reach a state where I seem to be watching things happen as if I were there. That is, I suppose, that my memory supplies what I had forgotten, so that it seems as if it were happening independently, though I am really making it happen." (67)

Woolf addresses here the delicate relationship between sensory memory and imagination. While the past seems vivid and real in her mind, she is aware that her mind is recreating this past.

Marcel Proust explores this dynamic in *Remembrance of Things Past* during a moment when, upon eating "petites madeleines," he envisions an entire portion of his childhood. The physical act of eating the cookies allows these memories to "take on colour and distinctive shape, become flowers or houses or people, solid and recognisable" (51). Proust appears to recognize, like Woolf, that these images materialize before him through the workings of his own mind. While "M. Swann's park," "the water-lilies on the Vivonne," and "the parish church" exist within his past, his imagination has allowed them to spring into being from his cup of tea in the present. The title objects in *Left Dad for a Cowboy* are meant to symbolize this process.

Initially, the use of objects as titles (and triggers) in my collection was inspired by Gertrude Stein's narrative technique in *Tender Buttons*. In her collection, each prose poem is titled after an object like "a red hat," "a chair," or "an umbrella" which the body of the text is

meant to represent. However, the text challenges the expected representation of the title, not allowing these ‘things’ to be classified based on the narrator’s momentary records of the world. It seemed to me that there exists an interesting connection between Stein’s subversive portrayal of these objects and the role objects play in memory. “A Doorknob” for example, evokes a complex memory, even while the object itself plays a minute role within that memory. The object inspires a particular sensory experience and a memory emerges—sometimes elaborate, but invested with meaning, nonetheless.

Woolf uses memory as a synonym for imagination when she states that her “memory supplies what [she] had forgotten.” Since forgetting would imply that the memory is lost, it is her imagination that fills in the blanks. Her present self constantly mediates her childhood experiences, letting language ultimately shape not only how she conveys the memories but also how she actually remembers them. Garry and Polaschek demonstrate in their study that “imagining events makes them more familiar, and subjects incorrectly attribute the increased familiarity of imagined events to their occurrence” (8). In “A Blindfold” for example, I want to confidently say that I was wearing one, but I remember feeling the teacher’s palm across my eyes and it becomes apparent that I probably wasn’t—yet when I see/touch/imagine a physical blindfold, that particular memory emerges in my mind. My construction of the blindfold as part of that memory is accredited to my imagination, no doubt, even though it remains uncertain whether or not the construction is one I created during the time the memory takes place or as part my recollection of it in the present. Either way, the blindfold’s existence conveys some aspect of character—with the pending probability of embarrassment, the blindfold perhaps is constructed

as a physical barrier to prevent myself from committing an act that goes against my moral judgment.

The role imagination plays in our memory is evident in *Michael Martone*. The author, Michael Martone, writes his autobiography as a series of “Contributor’s Notes” all beginning with the same phrase: “Michael Martone was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana . . .” Each entry, however, evolves into different, and usually conflicting, representations of his life. In one note, he describes the memory of own his birth, which is constructed both by stories told to him by his father and his own experience of his wife giving birth to their son. My prose poem, “A Photograph” offer a similar contemplation, portraying a pre-birth memory:

Her mom eighteen years old or nineteen with feathered black hair doesn’t have the perm yet no the perm comes later but has round cheeks always the round cheeks getting off work from Dominion grocery store her dad but not her dad then waiting in the parking lot with his Camaro the Camaro had to have been the Camaro his first car what colour was it again fluorescent green not black definitely not black. Crackle. A copy of *JT* for her birthday. Yes *JT* whatever album “Your Smiling Face” is on listening to it together in his living room her mom still in her uniform a zip-up dress shirt with a red collar to match the pants her dad and his thick-rimmed glasses square glasses magnifying glasses eventually passing the genetic trait to their daughter she needed glasses by the seventh grade to see the black board thinks it would have been better if she got her mother’s confidence but was blessed with her father’s vulnerability instead. (4)

The shift in point-of-view here, from the otherwise constant first-person perspective, is an attempt at navigating memory through different narrative forms. The inclusion of the present

voice in these poems is perhaps more explicit than elsewhere, with phrases such as ‘the perm comes later,’ “not her dad then,” and “eventually passing the genetic trait to their daughter.” The third-person perspective functions as a way to contemplate memories that reflect a combination of imagined moments based on the visual image of a photograph and stories that have been recounted by others. Through the use of run-on sentences and repeated phrases I project my constant second-guessing of what I know or think I know, further illustrating the conflicts that exist within the relationship between memory and imagination.

#### A PEN

In their article “Narrating the Self,” Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps argue that “[p]ersonal narratives shape how we attend to and feel about events. They are partial representations and evocations of the world as we know it” (21). The act of narration—decisions regarding language, how one chooses to describe experiences shapes how we feel about ourselves and others since “[n]arrative is an essential resource in the struggle to bring experiences to conscious awareness” (Ochs and Capp, 21). In narrating these trips to Montana, a place equally strange and beautiful, I began to realize that the language I chose to describe the landscape mirrored the way in which I viewed my mother. Phrases like “mountains that grow up in dust and disappear in fog or clouds” (12) and “[t]umbleweed and dirt that never leaves the deepest folds of the inside of my backpack” (55) allude to my impression of my mother as a distant figure whom I desperately wanted to connect with and push away simultaneously.

In “A Sketch of the Past” Woolf attempts to answer the question, “Who was I then?” (65) through the medium of writing. In her article, “Ideology into Fiction: Virginia Woolf’s ‘A Sketch

of the Past’,” Emily Dalgarno acknowledges that “writing is not so much designed to record or recall an already established history, as to attempt to create a coherent identity, by holding together in a pattern the various aspects about herself, or different identities, that she feels are all authentically part of who she is” (178). Through writing, Woolf is constantly negotiating between her memories and her construction of them using language. The prose poems in *Left Dad for a Cowboy* also attempt to navigate between the past and present, imaginary and true, and ordinary and significant, through language.

What obligations do we have to make distinctions within these dichotomies that exist in the process of remembering? All of these components constitute how and what we remember, and “[w]hile narrative does not yield absolute truth, it can transport narrators and audiences to more authentic feelings, beliefs, and actions and ultimately to a more authentic sense of life” (Ochs and Capps, 23). What we remember experiencing directly, what has been told to us through stories and photographs, what our imagination creates, and how we choose to narrate, all contribute to the construct of our subjective memory. All of these things, together, shape how we view our pasts, our presents, and ultimately our identities. Therefore, while it is perhaps not necessary to explicitly differentiate the components of our memory from one another, it is important, in attempting to portray the nature of memory, to render sensible the conflicts, questions, tensions, and overlaps that exist within it.

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## VITA AUCTORIS

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